

# BIG

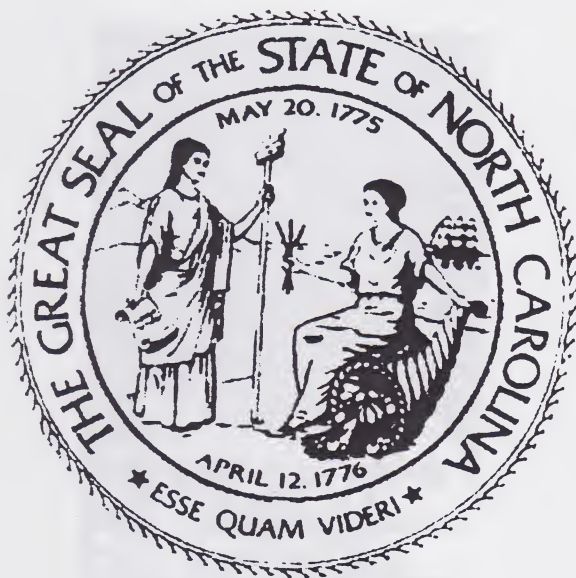


# HANDS

318



2011



**FIVE**



## ONE

I've been holed up in the basement of the Flint street house for days now, blasting And Justice for All..., and screen printing, avoiding the sun entirely except to make supply voyages back to the surface, to retrieve my daily rations of Ho Ho's and high-octane French press coffee. I emerge from the moldy depths with an astronaut's sense of vertigo, bleary-eyed and unsteady, finding the once-familiar world that I knew and loved a harrowing social landscape. A front porch full of people engaged in molasses-like banter judiciously nod their heads, acknowledging my return. Twenty-four hours a day you can stumble upon the same scene, like a department store window display. Stubble-faced mannequins with rust-colored T-shirts and faded tattoos holding cans of Budweiser and Pall Mall cigarettes. The brand consistency seems somehow predestined, having an anchoring effect on these otherwise completely improvised routines. Matt Joyner salutes me, impish grin and stature complimenting his Krishna/Bozo the Clown pink-shaved haircut, patch of chest fuzz poking out of a button-up polyester shirt, eyes darkened in an alcoholic's insomnia.

"The thing is," Joyner gesticulates to the flock, "the cavities aren't from not brushing. It's from grinding my teeth all night", he tells a porch full of people complimenting his chompers the day after a dentist's appointment. Stumbling home on an early morning, not having slept yet, Matt Joyner is always there on the front porch, greeting the dawn with beer and the New York Times.

"Hey" he nods "Where have *you* been?" he asks, grinning suggestively and sipping on the first of what is sure to be many beverages. The unassuming manboy ringleader of the misfits, leading us all merrily down the path of self-destruction. His partner in crime Bernard, the hype guy, is usually present too, a scruffy raver uniformed in a pink tanktop and baseball cap, financial backing for the operation. They're out there at all hours keeping sentry from under a mountain of cigarette butts and empty cans, torturing the upwardly-mobile indie-rock couple across the street who bought their house speculating to sell it up to developers in a few years.

Drive Like Jehu's Yank Crime blares on constant repeat out onto the porch, as does a sodden array of other sad bastard music. I hide down in the basement, beaming rays of awkwardness upon anyone attempting to come down and converse with me, utterly content with my solitary work. The tribe swells and contracts, at some hours walking out of my dank cave to find ten people on the porch, a revolving cast of men.



## TWO

Men—men are everywhere. Stumbling, drinking, cussing and falling off of the rotten porch. Andrew, the genius mechanic and inventor. Tin-tin, the young buck graffiti writer, DH, attic-dweller and full-time moper, Hans, the founder of the house, and self-described “non-punk”, who paradoxically, eons ago, bound all the different scenes together. Women seem to be supporting characters, making guest appearances filling a variety of roles in the testosterone-driven melodrama: an out-of-town girlfriend, a mother stopping in for a visit.

“Women...” a goateed guy on the porch mutters thirstily, “Where are all the women...” looking wantonly off into the street at nothing, like a wanderer in the desert seeing a mirage.

“What we have here is a lack of gender equity.” Someone else chimes in, invoking the Captain from Cool Hand Luke.

“Welcome to Boys Town, USA.”

“Certainly is”, they grumble, further discussion deferred by the lighting of more cigarettes.

Everyone was either born and raised here and can’t seem to get it out of their blood, or have somehow ended up here by freak coincidence: A good job, a girlfriend, grad-school or the oft-reasoned, but rarely accomplished “to save money”. You moved back home to kick the habit, fell off a train and never left, or grew up in the area and always seem to float back from more exotic, attractive destinations into its powerful magnetic pull, feeling the tug of the Bermuda Triangle. Everyone’s plans are tenuous, ever-shifting, and this Carolina hamlet is just a hitching post to regroup and gather supplies before darting off to continue on the whirlwind world tour.

In secret, we conjure escape plans for newer, grander adventures, most surely doomed to failure. Out here, there is an easy sense of camaraderie. Call it incidental art, the midnight impulses of people stuck in a place with low expectations. If anything cool happens, it’s a nice surprise. The cheap beer gushes abundantly, conversations meander around with plenty of room for pasture, accents syrupy like molasses. The sway of old trees and white drift of cloud cover in the middle of the night, stillness as pervasive as red brick poking through the kudzu-engulfed industrial wreckage. A comforting sense of stasis—nothing coming in or out except trains, and they’re not even going that far. The sweet Southern melancholy. I lean over on the porch swing and whisper to what looks like no one, “We will all end up back in Raleigh.”

### THREE

I've somehow managed to land a job working at a place called Catering Works, despite my spotty, mostly-fabricated work history, custom woven to cover up the multiple firings, dozens of quittings and several lengthy periods of time lapse in between jobs, inexplicable to my ruling class employers as "pseudo-revolutionary vagrancy". It's easier to attribute the lost time spent traveling around or working as a human guinea pig as an amnesiac fit, just a bump on the head and missing minutes to someone who sees the world in terms of paid vacations and years-til-retirement. The people at Catering Works are too friendly, putting me through none of the trauma-inducing "new guy" hazing that goes down at most workplaces—I saunter in twenty minutes late grumbling to myself and they greet me with warm morning salutations, I smash a mirror, they invite me out for drinks after work. There is unlimited coffee and bottled water on tap and a free catered meal set up for the kitchen staff to eat each day for lunch. My job description is laughable—I am given complete autonomy and paid by the hour to drive around the Triangle picking up leftover meals from corporate campuses and IT headquarters, free from any form of direct managerial supervision. I am the middle man for disposing of vast square poundage of corporate waste, a Robin Hood with a cart and a wet rag, in the corner at boardroom meetings cleaning up with explicit intent to later redistribute upper management's beef tips and mashed potatoes across the countryside. I'm suspicious—what gives? Have I been roped into some kind of front business to disappear us low-level grunts as fodder for some kind of new ultra-profitable Soylent Green-inspired start-up? Am I destined to be made into finger food for the upper-echelons of the Masonic corporate dynasty, and if so, can I come to terms with my future as a scrumptious tidbit on a deli tray as a small price to pay for the Marxist righteousness that this sweet job affords me? For my first couple of days a ruddy, jovial Eastern North Carolinian named Mike is assigned to drive around with me and help me learn the ropes. Mike, despite being married and in his late thirties, is obviously a total slacker. He brushes off his higher-ups in the kitchen, grabs the keys and completely wings my training.

"Alright, Aaron--these suits are going to be a real pain in your ass, you gotta make sure to Yessir-No-ma'am it all the way. Even when you're polite though, these fuckers will just stand there like cows watching you clean up. All the while you're trying to load up those Styrofoam trays of filet mignon to bring home to Mom, and they're breathing down your neck. So here's the secret-what you're going to do is just load everything up on the cart, take it out to the privacy of your van—and haul in out there *where they can't see you.*"

## FOUR

"Another nugget of wisdom, bud—Listen up, Aaron: get in good with the receptionists. If you make friends with a receptionist, a lot of times they'll hook you up with some soda and candy. I'm not talking about no fucking Snickers bars either. I'm talking about some real top-shelf shit. Honestly though, a lot of these ladies, after getting bossed around all day just want to feel like they're better than somebody, and that somebody is you. But don't let it get to you, get me?"

Mike and I get along well, taking advantage of our hourly wage to stop and hang out at gas stations drinking Gatorade. He smokes cigarettes, spinning the radio dial to the college station, and banging on the panel,

"Come on DJ man, play some Modest Mouse!"

We're on a crusade and we haul in—providing our entire extended circle of family, friends, and local panhandlers with a bottomless supply of Styrofoam-boxed leftovers. We're flying down the Beltline double-fisting cupcakes, living decadently off the excess of American society, endlessly subsisting off the fat of the land.

We get back to the kitchen and I am told that I can leave, but Morgan, the thick, goateed party-animal-turned-manager, commissions Mike to stick around and do the dishes.

"I'm sorry Mike. Help me out just this one time. Won't happen again." Morgan pleads. It dawns on me that bereft of any kind of union, the employees of Catering Works have somehow managed to weedle their way into full-on socialistic workers control, middle management having to practically beg anyone to do the most menial task slightly beyond their job description, and even then, the duty typically being performed with begrudging spitefulness.

"Well, I guess I'll see you tommorow buddy." Mike huffs, ruddy-faced and upset, like a kid being asked to come in and do his chores. I hear him go back into the kitchen and scream "FUCK!" throwing a stainless steel mixing bowl on the floor. Amina, the sweet, domestic metalhead with a speech impediment who spends her days listening to Metallica in the stockroom to fend off the division of labor trivium, rolls her eyes,

"Gawd, he has a gweat fawking awttitude."

Amina and I develop a decent rapport based on shared love of the classic power metal albums. After some time driving around she begins to reveal to me bits of shady past. You would never guess by looking at her, but just a decade ago she was an on-the-run speed freak, fleeing from warrants in California, living a life of Pulp Fiction-esque proportions.



Stepping over the Arizona state line drugless and penniless, and walking down the highway Amina is picked up by a truck and driven out to a trailer methlab in the middle of the desert where she is provided with gainful employment. In exchange for her janitorial services she is given the bonus job perk of licking the eyeball-popping residue out of the Mason jars after the finished product was removed to be sold. After having been up for weeks, a crunked-out Amina tells her boss that she is struck by "bad vibes", which, luckily, understanding the superhuman, insect-like quality of perception that a speed freak is endowed with, he pays attention to.

Like clockwork, that evening, Amina looks out the window to see helicopter headlights beaming into the trailer, and the entire gang rushes to work scrubbing clean all the Mason jars and flushing the homemade speed, minutes before the raid. Miraculously they finish this project just before the DEA busts out the windows and put guns to their heads, saved from life sentences by their superhuman hustle, no doubt prodded on by the contraband stimulant coursing through their veins. Amina hits the road again, stealing cars to get to Tucson, and continues to jack people's rides across the country. Eventually she was, as my uncle would phrase it, "slummin' it" down the East Coast and caught a chance ride to Raleigh where she knew nobody. She got a job at Catering Works, consciously deciding to assimilate rather than go out in a blaze of glory, all Emilio Estevez renegade folk hero in his often forgotten role in Wisdom. Life is so long it's almost vampiric in that sense of immortality, of exhaustive continuity, like having infinite credits on an arcade game where there's no plot, no forward direction. Like Vietnam, I meander around weird towns having awkward encounters, unable to tell the good guys from the bad guys. We get a million lives, a million chances to botch everything, fail, reevaluate our strategy and then start from scratch, warping back to level one.

## FIVE

I clock out and saunter around the corner to the Flint house, bearing boxes of sandwiches and steamed asparagus, as gifts for my brethren. I find myself gazing wistfully across the landscape of the living room, couches and floors dotted with shiftless layabouts, still sleeping even though it's almost sunset. I glance down at my stupid polo shirt and khakis and feel sick seeing what I've become—no longer lumpen, not untouchable, and still a step below receptionists in the social pecking order. I'm the cabana boy for the oppressor, fanning and feeding in exchange for first dibs at the scraps that fall from the table. DH stumbles down from his attic roost, spying the sandwiches. He immigrated from Ohio to North Carolina about a year ago on some specious reasoning that even he himself doesn't understand, possibly involving a defection on his part to our side in the heated battle over the claim to the Wright Brothers, and thus the mantle of "First in Flight", which North Carolina has obviously won, judging from our sweet license plates and hologram ID cards. DH works at a dry-cleaning place, and like everyone else I know, is pathologically dissatisfied with his life.

"Man, I can't wait to get out of Raleigh. I know everyone and I'm sick of them all. The walls are closing in. We have too many shows, it's driving me crazy. And *my room*--My room is horrible, Christ."

"Where are you thinking of going?" I ask holding out some catered bounty as a sacrificial offering to the awful god of his quarter-life crisis.

"I don't know man. Back to Columbus, I guess. I could messenger there, make some money. You know, hang out, do some things..."

The ambiguities that those of us without a plan speak in, our location defining our goals, rather than the other way around. Even under the yoke of employ, DH still manages to retain a considerable amount of freedom on the job to listen to records all day and mindlessly surf the internet. We tire of bumming each other out with the tyranny of geography, so we get high instead, throwing on a DVD of Aqua Teen Hunger Force. After we finish watching this episode and then we'll do something else, and later get in a car and drive it to go do another thing, sponging up each event, plotline, or conversation and filing it away as sticky gray matter to be referenced at a later date if it seems worth remembering. Everything we do will be auto-evaluated and placed on a scale somewhere between mildly and completely unsatisfying, and eventually forgotten. Freedom--this is what people fight and die for. This is all we did with it. I put some popcorn in the microwave and read the headlines, frowning. I realize all these things. But I don't know what to do.

## SIX

Patrick and I prowl our way across the tenuous concrete landscape in his rickety, clanking Plymouth Neon. The shifting sand dunes of suburban development, fleeting mirages of Golds Gyms, furniture emporiums, Kerr Drugs and freestanding Cinnabon drive-thrus.

"Damn" he says, scratching his head "Didn't there used to be a Hannaford's over there?" pointing at what was now vacant strip mall retail space beside what was formerly my favorite Borders before I was eighty-sixed. There's not enough time to lament the losses before new construction blossoms like kudzu, fertilized by land grabs and city-councilman/developer synergy. I realize that in the bleak future I could write strictly in intertextual pop culture references and franchises and be succinctly understood, communicating in some kind of dystopian Esperanto. It is in these kryptonite-weakened moments that I long for a few hours in the subversive Marxist constructs shown to us in movies like Repo Man; where you could go to the store and a beer was a BEER, and bread was BREAD. I cough; we have to roll down the windows to not get suffocated out by the fumes from Patrick's backfiring muffler. We're doing a parody of some kind of inverse Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, crawling through lazy intersections on our way into a desert of excruciatingly sober and impregnable mundanity. "Soldiers for nothing", I think someone from sometime once said.

Peering out into tinted minivan windows at happy families stuck at long stoplights is like staring down a pride of lions—I recognize that Discovery-channel animal indifference in there in their eyes, like if there weren't this glass between us, they would have no problem tearing us limb from limb. Looking on at the sterile bubble with a sense of distance, it's obvious that not that much has changed, even though we're no longer in high school driving around looking for booze to steal, stuff to break into; the unmistakable brand of the misfit has been burnt too deep, and despite the passing years, they still haven't lost the scent. We lurch forward when the light turns, no time for pause in the never-ending quest for another diversion—an errand to run, food to devour, space to exist in for just a moment, even if that comes along with a modest surcharge.



"How about we go to Goodberry's? My treat." Patrick suggests. We drive down Maynard, forward motion the only constant in this roiling dervish of sapling trees and bleached exteriors, placated by the soothing turquoise and unobtrusive eggshell tones of the color-coordinated boxstore scenery. We are bludgeoned into submission by the simulacra. Past an Irish pub that two years ago was an Italian restaurant that four years before that was a Pizza Inn. Impermanence is the only certainty, my inconsistency the only constant. Goodberry's is packed, disorderly lines staggering out down the pavement filled with high school sweethearts on dates, SAS businessmen loosening their ties and to me, the most inscrutable genus of the suburban Serengeti--the single late-twenties indie-rockers. Skittish and handsome, these are mesmerizingly beautiful creatures if you happen upon seeing one, emerging only sporadically from their matchbox condominium habitats to look for a mate or coquetishly prey upon an indigenous panini sandwich. Although elusive in the field, they are reportedly easier to locate on popular internet dating sites.

We play suburban, making it into an ironic game, pretending, like everyone else, that *we're* the ones who don't belong here, the ones who have gone deep undercover in the opulent desolation. We love it, hate it, we're victims to circumstance, all. No one fits the mold properly, and no one definitively plans to live the rest of their lives here, wasting away. My mother, for instance, circa 2007: "I just want to get high." Patrick's dad, the backporch philosopher, smokes cigarettes and muses listlessly, choosing us as his two disciples

"I'll tell you what my plan is--As soon as my cruise guidebooks start selling, I'm packing out and moving to Cancun. Once we get some of that synergy flowing with Carnival then we'll be golden. Yep, boys--we'll just have to lean back, relax and wait for those books to sell. Because, I'll tell you what--the Yankees around here are like fuckin' cockroaches."



## SEVEN

Within two days we've reestablished the parasitic routine that we began when we were thirteen which absolves us from feeling like assholes: sneaking into blockbuster movies at the Megaplex, stealing Foucaults and Baudrillards from the Barnes and Noble, gnoshing on samples at the Trader Joes. The lifestyle paradox keeps those countercultural endorphins steadily flowing—If we're not materially supporting the nebulously referred to "machine", are we, in fact, raging against it by gluttoning ourselves with it's benefits? Stolen or paid in full, the squirrel-like accumulation of resources is a panacea. Who's your scapegoat? It makes more sense to be here on the front lines of the encroaching stampede of American exurbs, rather than playing metropolitan in someone else's soon-to-be-gentrified neighborhood. In two days we have become honorary suburbanites, and antithetical to every punk song we've ever heard, and anything anyone remotely credible has ever told us-- *We like it*. We outline plans to extend our tour of duty by getting sponsored to stay out here one day, write for big city magazines about the so-very-real America that they left behind, the untapped melodrama that they missed out on while reading the soap rags in the Harris Teeter quick checkout line. The thick, impenetrable, reality-TV-show-worthy angst of the full suburban disclosure. The undeniable experience of strip mall kismet, the way the set frames the actors instead of devouring them: Walking alone past mall mausoleums at sunrise, SUNNY 93.9 blasting into empty parking lots to no one from portico entrance loudspeakers mounted under a gigantic American flag. Late-night conversations on the curb in an empty parking lot imbued with a cosmic importance. The Folgers commercial early-morning goodbye kiss in the Jeep, seeing your breath in the car as you draw away, exhaust pouring from the tailpipe into the purple winter's dawn.

## EIGHT

"Hey, get up"

I roll over and groan, shirtless, wrapped in a down comforter, baking in the early morning sun pouring in from big curtain-less windows. It's early and I have no reason to be up; I'm going nowhere and doing nothing, not today, not tomorrow, not a month from now. Patrick gets up and takes the comforter off the bed.

"Don't look," he commands,

"Wh..." before I get to the vowel, as I'm bracing my arms to push up out of his bed, my hand hits a pool of moisture on what is obviously a pee-soaked mattress.

"Aw fuck...Jeeesus..." I recoil in disgust, pulling my hand away. We both burst out laughing.

"Yeah, I know...I really wish I had a little monitor that told me when I've had too much to drink and can't control my bladder anymore". Sheepishly embarrassed, he's laid out a palette in the living room for me to sleep on, takes the sheets off the bed and jumps in the shower. When you've been friends for so long, it's hard to be phased. I stumble into the living room, and return to my sulky, limp sleep, falling back into thick dreams of distant tundras and unexplored cities. Big aluminum buses, holdovers from the sixties driven by quirky, short-circuited gray old men who look like Colonel Sanders through the nameless wastes of Iowan metropolises I never knew existed. An oasis hidden in vast empty plains, a wide, roaring river cutting through it's center, neon-lit all night diners and narrow alleyways burrow around glass-paneled skyscrapers. Unable to sleep anymore, I open my eyes to a bleached-white downtown Greensboro, as stolid and immutable as a Grecian marble, patiently waiting outside the second-story windows oblivious to the toll taken by passing years. The morning passes in a fugue, time slowing down and speeding up at its own will, difficult to distinguish an agonizing minutes from the well-spent hour. The foggy in-between time spent pacing, reading an article describing the different incarnations of Captain America. I rearrange the articles on the table to make them look more symmetrical. The JPF building looms outside, the most well-endowed member of Greensboro's chodish downtown scraping the sky with a Futurist's flare, it's violent, abrupt geometry a reminder of more self-assured times, when Randian architects were unfettered by heady, subjective questions, like "Why build so big?". It just *had* to be, man, to satisfy that inexhaustible impetus humanity is endowed with to expend its lifetimes on truly ridiculous and grandiose, though ultimately pointless, endeavors.





## 26: Mass Mobilization of Youth

Despite the well-founded dissatisfaction of the younger generation with the kind of life offered by the bloated affluence of megatechnic society, their very mode of rebellion too often demonstrates that the power system still has them in its grip: they, too, mistake indolence for leisure and irresponsibility for liberation. The so-called Woodstock Festival was no spontaneous manifestation of joyous youth, but a strictly money-making enterprise, shrewdly calculated to exploit their rebellions, their adulations, and their illusions. The success of the festival was based on the tropismic attraction of 'Big Name' singers and groups (the counter-culture's Personality Cult!), idols who command colossal financial rewards from personal appearances and the sales of their discs and films.

With its mass mobilization of private cars and buses, its congestion of traffic en route, and its large-scale pollution of the environment, the Woodstock Festival mirrored and even grossly magnified the worst features of the system that many young rebels profess to reject, if not to destroy. The one positive achievement of this mass mobilization, apparently, was the warm sense of instant fellowship produced by the close physical contact of a hundred thousand bodies floating in the haze and daze of pot. Our present mass-minded, over-regimented, depersonalized culture has nothing to fear from this kind of reaction—equally regimented, equally depersonalized, equally under external control. What is this but the Negative Power Complex, attached by invisible electrodes to the same pecuniary pleasure center?

## I: A DIGRESSION ON RADICAL ACTIVISM

Who doesn't long for a bygone era of answerable questions and clearer intentions? More concrete dilemmas like "Given this great mass of limestone and these Hebrew slaves, how do I construct a pyramid" rather than "What the hell am I doing?" Most people born into the Western world in the last fifty years have been afforded a relatively stable material existence (food, water, shelter), and furnished with large blocks of time for socialization, entertainment, and some kind of education, whether standardized or freestyle. Given this globally-speaking, disproportionate prosperity, the children of the latter twentieth-century, innately grasping this injustice have developed some pretty twisted coping mechanisms. The (predominately white) children of the sixties fomented a benevolent and drug-fueled cultural revolution in the colleges, eager to allay their bourgeoisie boredom, be accepted as "down" with the real shit that was going on ghettos across America. The well-meaning youth of morally-bankrupt Western countries, entombed in the realm of material certainty quickly spiraled into intellectual dementia, writing pamphlets about the poverty of student life, the abolishment of boredom, appropriating struggles left and right, and dutifully sewing together patchwork quilts of oppression. This often led to assumptive displays of theatrical terrorism like exploding bags of shit on US Embassies in the name of the indigenous people of unpronounceable countries, that many said radicals later recant when the pendulum finally swings back the other way and they have morphed into soccer moms and small business owners.

## II. MODERN ART

While some strap on the bombs, the rest of us are packing bong, slouching towards oblivion, our potential energy to do cool stuff is frozen by some paralyzing understanding of its futility. Art: it's no longer a career path sure to lead to pariah social status. The only picture that it seems appropriate to paint is a painting of people having their picture taken by famous paintings. We're running away from original ideas, down a mirrored hall of irony and reference refracting in on itself into infinity. My peers, I must ask: who among you is missing digits? Will those prodded on by some deep-seated compulsion, damned to feed those inner demons and always sweat-drenched seconds away from cutting off an ear or sticking your head in the microwave please stand up? These bodies are on lease, and we choose to live crisp stainless lives obsessed with the condition in which it will be returned to the cleaners? When the time comes, everyone soils themselves in fear. As the cold-blooded O.G. Werner Herzog once put it, echoing the sentiments of the late, great NWA: "I believe the only underlying elements of the universe are Chaos, Hostility, and Murder." So, I implore you, my friends—Smoke cigarettes, debauch your name, sully yourself in misguided action and let your well-pressed human-skin suit be dragged through the mud and cold rain.





## 27: Rituals of 'Counter-Culture'

The depressing monotony of megatechnic society, with its standardized environment, its standardized foods, its standardized invitations to commercialized amusement, its standardized daily routines, produces a counter-drive in over-stimulation and over-excitement in order to achieve a simulation of life. Hence 'Speed' in all its forms, from drag races to drugs. With its narcotics and hallucinogens, its electrically amplified noise and stroboscopic lights and supersonic flights from nowhere to nowhere, modern technology has helped to create a counter-culture whose very disorder serves admirably to stabilize the power system.

Contrast this multi-media delirium with the intelligent, emotionally healthy plans of the Peace Moratorium, which reached a brief climax in the national Peace Mobilization at Washington in November 1969. Tens of thousands of people, young and old, braving inclement weather, marched with dignity before the White House all through the night, each reciting the name of an American killed in the Vietnam 'war,' and a similar demonstration was held in Washington Square in New York City. Note the use of the lighted candle, an ancient religious symbol, carrying human echoes that go back to the paleolithic caves. Though this demonstration did not win its immediate political objective, its effect upon the participants may yet be recorded in a more vital counter-culture, centered in alert, clear-minded, articulate human beings in full possession of all their faculties; ready to act, in the words of ancient Athens' Ephebic Oath, "single-handed or with the support of all."

### III. MOVE BACK HOME

Generation X rationalized our glacial laziness, gave it philosophical ground with masturbatory one liners such as "Who's ever written a great work about the intense effort required *not* to create?" We shrug as the creative impulse floats into our field of vision, ripe for the picking—"Hey, there it goes..." idly watching Law and Order as it drifts away, unfulfilled.

I stumbled upon a disturbingly accurate statistic in my amateur sociological research--People born between 1975 and 1986, my specific age group, have been dubbed by theoreticians the "Boomerang Generation". We are alleged to be united by only a single common thread—a tendency to go out and experience life, travel, work and maybe go to college but eventually move back home. Well-accustomed to sloping worldwide homogeny by now, bored by the weight and accomplishment of history, the urban benefits of an "intellectual life" now available for download on the internet, we've discovered a cynical truth—there's nowhere left to run. Go out and experience the world like the caricature of a haughty Southern aunt—begrudging from the moment we leave, complaining about the food, the rent, strange mores and customs, too much subculture, lack of Starbucks, etc., thinking we somehow know a place intimately just by judging it primarily from it's external cultural indicators. That said, in a city I find it hard to leave the apartment, because although the vast, metropolitan area spreads out limitlessly with things to explore, there's nothing to really see but the spinning rotoscope of ugly apartment buildings, parks, bodegas, and bars. The self-questioning and untrustworthy sense of intuition that some of the more shiftless among us have come to expect. Failing to halt the Iraq war, my generation has taken up nostalgic pastimes like "crafting", "croquet" and "zines" to fill up the empty space between the yawns.

### IV: SUFJAN STEVENS, UBERMENSCH

The world cries out for confidence and determination, for someone with a plan. Look at the widespread adoration afforded to singer-songwriter Sufjan Stevens after announcing his intentions to make an album about each of the fifty-states. Despite being only two states into it and in his early thirties, making the likelihood of him actually finishing it pretty low, his popularity continues to balloon. Look at those relatively successful fascists like Hitler and Mussolini who really took care of business, compared to farm-league guys like George W. Bush who come off as fidgety and unsure as the rest of us, without a five-year plan. Ambitious undertakings like scale model-train recreations or building the Taj Mahal are absorbing preoccupations that provide a lifelong sense of fulfillment, but they are ultimately just distractions--skeletal architectures meant to immure life with a degree of manageability.





## 29: Passage to Biotechnics

Marcel Duchamp's 'Nude Descending a Staircase' (left) counts as one of the most brilliant specimens of cubism: the representation of bodily movement in a mechanically conceived abstraction. In this work, as in many of Fernand Leger's paintings of the human figure, the specifically organic qualities are reduced to mechanical equivalents. The reverse process, of utilizing the machine itself to represent and express life, began with those brilliant studies of animal motion which resulted in the motion picture. With the invention of the stroboscopic camera, it became possible, as in Gjon Mili's photograph (right), to show successive motions on a single film. This is a more biotechnic equivalent of Duchamp's 'Nude,' for it does justice to the mobile beauty of woman's body.

## **V: MODERN ART REVISITED**

Flashback to my college independent study art class. It's the end of the year, a show-and-tell session of what you've been working on all semester. One particularly quiet and demure sorority girl gets up and in front of the class gingerly places her rectangular canvas up against the blackboard. In the center of the canvas is a flat, gray two-dimensional square, surrounded by four light blue parallelograms, detailed with the kind of marshmallow clouds that you would see and imagine were drawn by a third-grader. To me, it looks like a slapdash, late-night job. She begins her "crit":

"This painting is about being boxed-in. The gray at the center of the painting is representative of my life. It's dull, bland and seems to continue without purpose. See the clouds? The blue surrounding it represents my freedom, my choices. I'm boxed in. What kind of jelly to buy at the supermarket, whether I want to have kids or go to grad school. What brand or shade of gray to paint my little square. I am stupefied by the minute indecisions that add up to form who I am, whether or not I want to make something of myself. It all boils down to chance and factors: if I'm at the right place at the right time. Where I live, what job I work, how many hours a day I spend on the Internet. This is about wishing I had one sole purpose in life, rather than this potpourri of options that I'm presented with. I guess that's it."

## **VI: HAPPINESS AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Sometimes the worst thing that can happen is to have all of your wildest dreams come true. It's good to leave something to hope for. Like Andy's faux-hobohemia fantasies of finding a wealthy older woman to nurture and take care of him. Sure enough, in his travels through a small town in Mexico, a wealthy, beautiful girl who loved Russian literature and Japanese film became enamored with him. Two days later, she confided,

"I want you to stay here and be my boyfriend."

"But where am I going to live?" he asked, no doubt sweating, checking his flanks for an exit.

"My father has this building you can stay in."

"But how much will rent be? I don't have any money."

"Oh, you!" she giggled, "You'll stay there for free, silly."

Obviously, this sounds like the kind of story that crusty old hobos tell each other over trashcan fires to keep warm on lonely frostbitten nights, the kind of event that would warrant some kind of world-encircling celebratory round of the chorus of Tom Petty's "Even the Losers", but it's all true. Andy stayed in the immaculately well-kept building and played the role of the girl's import-boyfriend. He shakes his head, telling the story to me as we look out onto toxic waste from the Williamsburg Bridge.

"It lasted about a week. Then it drove me crazy, man. I just couldn't do it. I wish for things and then they just come true. It got too weird, and I had to skip town."



## NINE

There was a time when I inhabited a back-unit one room hovel on Park Avenue. The one with the little ramshackle three-walled porch facing a dirtpit backyard, where I could stumble home drunk after a party to find a half-empty bottle of Nite Train left for me, like an offering from some omnipotent hobo who was watching over the place on those honeysuckle-ripe spring nights when I was out. I would saunter into my cavernous kitchen at around three and cook up the one meal that I ate every day—two cups of cooked rice doused in Texas Pete, prescribing to the starvation diet not out of lack of means but from some deluded sense of principle. My neighbor was a scorched-out tweaker in his late-twenties, an old skateboarder turned full-time home methlab attendant. He emerged only occasionally, shirtless on his back staircase, stretching and rubbing his eyes in the unfamiliar daylight. Like a black widow he would lay in wait, attempting to wrangle one of the many roving prostitutes back into his dank, bone-filled lair. I would sit on my stairs flipping through an issue of Inside Front waiting for the woman to slam the door and leave, before he would emerge minutes later, grinning and terrible, raising his arms victoriously to the heavens, like a gladiator giving thanks for celestial release.

Up at the apex of the hill on the corner by the tracks lived the local punk nobility, all crammed together in the shoddy bottom floor of a big subdivided Victorian house. Matt Joyner, the drunken self-promoting Puck-like deity of the local scene, with his own steadily selling line of screen-printed T-shirts with the phrase, "Matt Joyner Ruined my Life". There was Greg, the bald, leering Uncle Fester doppelganger covered in punk band tattoos, with an unquenchable cocaine habit that would later send him beating it out of town as quickly as he could. Dwayne, the street-wizened, dread-hawked graffiti writer and screen-printing impresario who would get me so high I couldn't see and then fuck with me relentlessly, testing to see if I could recall obscure facts and minutia. When I couldn't answer, he would get close enough for me to feel his spittle on my face and shout a torrent of unrepeatable profanities, breaking me like an army drill sergeant. And who could forget John Henderson, the lecherous, drunk Bill Murray lookalike who could always be found talking in hushed tones on the porch with the pretty girl at the party, touching legs and attempting to mate. The party churned into action every night, always eerily the same, like someone rewinding and pushing the play button on a tape they just can't get enough of. The amnesia of turned-over furniture, broken glass, and ripped t-shirts, the Lord of the Flies-like tribal rule. I poked my head in almost every night but kept a safe distance, peering around the corner, watching the wreckage bloom and wither like an epiphyllum.

## TEN

Instead of participating in the Bacchanal, I would go back to my hovel and try to take advantage of living alone, making meek attempts at courtship that never seemed to pan out. My little windowless bedroom tomb with my milk crate mattress-side table, scavenged ripped-up sofa and rattling window AC unit. It was hardly sexy, the windows all taped up from being broken into so often, but hey, it was all mine, no roommates or parents around to ruin everything. That's seems to be the appeal of living alone--there's no one to blame for your cockroach-infested sink but yourself.

"Hey, wanna come over and listen to records?" I would venture awkwardly. But, having only about ten of them, mostly unpalatable, an awkward silence would eventually set in, inescapable for my fumbling lack of confidence. I somehow became acquainted with an older, cosmopolitan hipster, no doubt only wasting time with me because Raleigh's Depression-era slim pickins' had forced her to drastically reconsider her acceptable age range. Deanna Ferris, she lived in a big house with lots of roommates and had crates of records lining every spare inch of her walls. We stayed up late talking about Archers of Loaf and theorizing about the South until I would bike down Hillsborough Street, drunk on the drawn-out romance of it all, kicking over newspaper dispensers the entire way home just to prove that I wasn't losing my edge. It went on like this; sweet, predictable and platonic until she called up one day asking if she we could hang out at *my* place. We hadn't ever really hung out at my apartment, because it was decorated like a ratty opium den and about as somnolent, but OK Deanna, sure, come over. I sat twiddling my thumbs until I heard a brief knock. Deanna rushed in the door vibrating with a determined august glow.

"Hey" she sauntered in, grinning, and confident, sitting down beside me on my mattress on the floor.

"H-hey, what's up?" I stammered.

"Ohhhhhhh...nothing" she smiled mischievously, taking my hand into hers and guiding it onto her exposed leg. I peeled it away from her thigh like she had pressed my hand to a hot griddle.

"Oh yeah? Nothing, huh? Yeah? Not much here either. Have you checked out that new Milemarker record yet? A lot poppier than the other stuff, more of a new wave vibe, the girl does more vocals..." I gulped. Deanna edged along the mattress, like a tigress hungrily closing in on her skittish prey.

"Aaron, Aaron...what am I going to do with you..." she shook her head in mock disappointment, pausing for a moment.

"Hey, did you know I can suck my own nipple?" she asked expectantly, and without waiting for an answer stood up and jerked down her low-cut black shirt and bra to demonstrate. I fell apart instantly.

"Uh, you can, can't you..." I stuttered, paralyzed by inexperience unsure if this would be the time to, as they said, "make my move". Deanna, obviously annoyed by my hesitance in what was starting to seem like a fruitless progression of events, threw back her arms decisively, and stood up.

"Well; It's two-for-one martinis tonight down at Kings. I guess I'm gonna take off. See ya later, *Sweetie*." She rolled her eyes, dripping with derision, and picked up her bag, quickly scurrying out the door. I lay there shell-shocked at how effortlessly I had botched a truly precocious attempt at my fledgling virginity. I got up and put on a worn-out DEVO record and lay there inert. Yeah, that's the spirit. Man-mimicking-machine, ghostly voice of Mark Mothersbaugh floating out across my barren, stupid room:

*"If you live in a small town / you might meet a dozen or two  
Young alien types who step out and dare to declare/  
We're through being cool"*



## ELEVEN

I needed a drink and something stiff, but they wouldn't let me into bars because I was underage, and besides, I wouldn't go to a bar anyway, out of principle.

"Bars" I would scoff, "What kind of asshole wants to go sit at a bar?" Even though I had never really hung out at a bar, I still managed to assert my deep-seated belief that it was a boring and stupid thing to do. My more patient friends would listen to my ramblings: visions of speakeasies, house shows, roving free food programs dancing in my head. But when they left to go to the Jackpot, I sat alone, thirsty and miserable and without the necessary perspective to place my angst socio-historically, on a continuum of disturbed veiny-necked young adolescents stretching back through time. Instead, I sipped on a warm, half-drunk bottle of Nite Train left by my guardian angel hobo, Goddamn him, and listened to the sultry clanking of trains being built on the fog-covered trackage just down the street.

The world was elsewhere, surely beyond the Blue Ridges, meant to be seen from a freight train or Greyhound bus. I would walk down the gravel path by the prehistoric-sized weeds next to the tracks and dream of big houses in distant, sexy locales, of an escape from the lousy, stale Southern isolation. Rita, my partner in crime, and I would obsessively pace downtown and back on the tracks, looking out on a landscape of broken bottles and rusted metal and seeing only potential.

"Hey, we could really clean this underpass up, and throw shows and parties down here" we egg each other on, "God, we really should weld together these pieces of shit-encrusted, jagged, rusty metal together into some kind of sculpture!"

Overflowing with caffeinated teenage adrenaline, synapses sparking with bullshit plans as we tittered down the rails. In a fit of optimism, finally putting our brilliant ideas into praxis, we brought garbage bags and spraypaint down to the overpass to clean up, stalwartly intending to plant the sunflower of anarchy where there was once only industrial ruin.



The clock that ran the rest of the world had stopped ticking for us, and we were just waiting for something to happen, ageless, illimitable. Trapped within the recesses of the Bermuda Triangle, its lush thirty or so inescapable miles, locked in its humid, deciduous embrace, and nursed by that left-behind feeling of having a well-kept secret. From the rolling small-town Mayberry academia of autumnal Chapel Hill and Carrboro through a thick copse of wilderness sporadically dotted with biotech campuses and multibillion dollar IT facilities. The thick layers of old rust being scraped off Durham's mills and Southern style shotgun houses to be refurbished for artists. The cinematographic quality of the scorching eye of dawn rising over Durham's wide, empty streets and closed bus stations before the great writhing snake emptied itself into the sprawling, endless suburbs surrounding Raleigh; it's emerald, metropolitan skyline one last great widening "Hurrah!" for civilization before the wild, rugged descent from the sand hills down into the swampy, haunted coastline.

## TWELVE

I started seeing this girl named Stacy, we didn't know each other's last names, that was just the kind of haphazard tryst it was. Her sluggish, affected speech pattern, cat-eye glasses, and extensive collection of what at the time I referred to as "girl music" provided me with my first glimpse into the sordid world of the valley girl intelligentsia. She lived tucked away down fresh asphalt in a brand new condo complex just up the street from the tumorous swelling of development around Crabtree Valley Mall, in a sterile little second floor walk-up unit, her lavish lifestyle begrudgingly imparted on her by her absentee dad. Her paintings covered the walls, fitting that late-nineties indie rocker mold of splayed-open emotion, illustrious naked men and women with asymmetrical haircuts pulling at each other by the entrails, and cut-away diagrams of the human heart or what have you.

We would drive out to Fuquay-Varina blasting Sleater-Kinney at midnight to stay up all night drinking with two sweet Southern lesbians, old friends of Stacy's, who lived a life of tender domesticity out in the country. Inevitably around five AM or so one of the stumbling drunk lesbians would nod at her Harley and then point at me and grin,

"Want a ride, buddy? Eh, Eh?" she would jostle me good-naturedly, like a kid brother.

"No, no, I can't. Bad balance..." I stammered off meek excuses, sissy that I was. Looking back, I'm confounded by my prudence, having since lost all preservationary instincts that would normally make a rational adult think before getting in a moving vehicle with a drunk driver.

"Suit yourself" she would shrug, suiting up in her leather and helmet and hopping on her hog to speed off through pastures and farmland, not to return until well past dawn, windswept and laughing (Of course, I now consider not taking this ride one of the profound regrets of my lifetime, up there with missing out on a Disney World vacation when I was ten, looking back and wanting to shake my seventeen-year-old self and impart my grandfatherly Norman Mailer-like wisdom-- "Look at yourself, kid. Scared to live. Scared to die.")

Stacy and I would bed down in their living room, under a mountain of fresh blankets, performing awkward drunken early morning hook-ups in the pale refracting light of dawn. We would then return to her condo in the afternoon to drink more, discuss the profound metaphor of her paintings, and then lay on top of her covers under the burning orange of the late-afternoon sun.

Stacy would occasionally speak in hushed tones about her psycho ex-boyfriend Rascoe. Rascoe, I discerned from the pictures, was built like a fucking tank. Not to scare me, she would slur when we were at the peak of some kind of substance abuse, but sometimes Rascoe stops by unannounced when he's drunk and begs to be taken back. But don't you worry about him, just get in bed with me. Of course this sent me into reeling insomniac daymares while Stacy snored fast asleep beside me, imagining Rascoe busting through the deadbolt to find me there with his ex-girlfriend, dismantling me in one Bo Jackson, Superbowl-worthy tackle. I gulped and peered out from the sheets, the whites of my eyes the only light other than the horizontal streaks of the parking lot floodlight coming through the venetian blinds.

### THIRTEEN

Seemingly out of nowhere, a week went by and I didn't hear from Stacy. She didn't pick up her phone, and hadn't told me she was going out of town.

"Could be the cold turkey break-up" Joyner suggested.

"Yeah, but..." I mused, scratching my chin and trying to decide how to proceed, "seems a little bit more eerie than that". This being before the advent of cellphone technology, I risked it and decided to go by her condo. I tiptoed up the steps, I arrived at her door, chest heaving with fear. New telephone books and Kill Rock Stars mail-order records were piled up on a generic shag "WELCOME" mat, and a thin coat of pollen was accumulating on the doorknob. As I suspected, she had disappeared, left no trace, gone, caput, *finit*. I banged my head on the cheaply-manufactured fiberboard door, and mustered ghostly moan of lament for my pathetic love life, somehow deeply intuiting that both Stacy \_\_\_\_\_ and Deanna Ferris were only foreshadowing, just a fleeting taste of future romantic failures.

I heard scattered rumors and innuendos that she had overdosed. That she had tried to commit suicide. That she had flown to Monaco, Tripoli, to the Isle of Lesbos. That she was a lesbian again. Then one day, as mysteriously as she disappeared, as if emerging from a time lapse, she called.

"Stacy?"

"Yeah, man. It's me."

"Where were you? I stopped by..."

"Oh, Jesus. My Dad's a fucking prick. He called the cops on me, They came banging the door down, screaming, yelling, I got put away, it was a whole big debacle. Let's just forget about it, ok? How have you been? Come on over."



## FOURTEEN

We hung out one or two more times, but the tryst was going nowhere, just like me. Relationships, as Darwin meant include in his dissertation, eventually evolve or die out. Is it a stick in your spokes or a new set of wheels? It puttered out like a car with no gasoline, and I went back to nuzzle up against old man loneliness, this time appreciating the stubbly tickle of his bittersweet embrace. That is until one night, a couple of weeks later, hard at work at three AM, I lunged to pick up the phone before my mom woke up.

"Hello?" I gasped, out of breath.

A familiar slurred voice, that faintest tinge of Piedmont twang, on the other end of line.

"Aaron, this is Stacy. I'm just kicking it here with Dwayne, and I'm calling to tell you something, buddy---You are a turd not fit to wring my fucking toilet, I NEVER liked you, not for one, single..."

"Stacy? Is that you? Wait a second...are you fucked up?"

"...GODDAMN minute. In fact, I was just *bored*."

I sat in stony silence on my bed, seething, discerning a Heavens to Betsy song playing in the background on the other end of the line.

"Wha--Yes, we've been drinking since, Oh, about eight or so...and we took a few pills, so fucking what?"

"What is it you *really* want to say to me?" she hissed, daring me to light the powder keg. I could hear Dwayne's deep bellow coming like a freight train from the other end of the line,

"Wake up, Bitch." His foghorn baritone ringing out, "Me and Stacy were sitting here and got to talking about your punk ass and thought we'd give you a little ring. You're just a little fake ass little punk. You ain't never hopped no *train*. You ain't never lived in no *squat*. I was smoking blunts on rooftops and screen-printing dope shit before you were in diapers."

He elucidated,

"Stacy here tells me you ditched out on her, just like a little bitch. Don't even *think* about hanging up the phone. We're just gonna sit here and keep your sorry ass up all night."

They cackled, following stage directions from the script of the cruel sitcom that was my life. I lay agape, an icy sheet of indifference slowly spreading across my chest. Not quite the Rascoe nightmare I expected, but worse, maybe worse. I sighed and listened to them share a loud slobbery kiss for my aural pleasure, before shoving the phone underneath the comforter and muffling it, still listening to the far away sounds of indistinguishable squawks emitting into the sheets from the tinny earpiece. I put my arms up behind my head, lay back and closed my eyes; but the damage was done, and they were right—I couldn't sleep.

## FIFTEEN

Now there I was, a desperate bachelor, sitting alone in my apartment, having reached a new alien lows, fearing all social interactions other than the kind mediated by paper brusquely tossed over a counter in exchange for coffee or gasoline. It was in this kryptonite-weakened state that I spied an advertisement on the back of the local alternative weekly for a free local phone dateline.

"Why not?" I think, "What more do I have left to lose?"

This is how it ends, I realize—marooned, isolated in our apartments and condos, sending out smoke signals over fiber optic wiring, screaming into the abyss for a human connection. I lower the blinds on all my windows and pace the floor, and then dial. The phone rings. A sexy female computer voice picks up, sopping with innuendo, backed by primal thump of some generic techno dance-beats

*Welcome to Quest Personals. Raleigh's HOTTEST local dateline. Your choice for Raleigh's HOTTEST local singles. Men press one.*

I gulp and press one, wrapping the cord around my fingers.

*Now you will record your personal greeting* the sexy digitized single prepares me to record my paragon of personality to sell myself, an attempt to convince others that I am unique individual worth wasting precious free trial minutes with. I clear my throat and lower my voice, attempting to sound older than I am.

"Hey, Aaron here. I'm in the Raleigh area and uhhh, just bored, looking for someone to hang out with."

I know, it fell a little short on describing the idiosyncrasies of my personality, in detailing the unconquerable snow-covered peaks of my vast, towering intellect but that was it. This is why I don't do well in cities, finding myself sweating when accosted with questions like "What's so unique about you?" Sure, I can hula hoop, and maybe have a few other America's Funniest Home Videos-worthy skills, but my existence, like most peoples, boils down to a few standard, universal processes—Work a boring job, produce largely pointless commodities, eat, breathe, make excrement, and if we're lucky, copulate, for pleasure or progeny. But thanks to the pleasantly engineered voice of my A.I. guide, I am ushered from the dark nether regions of my subconscious and prodded to get out onto the digital dance floor to meet some hot local singles. I click through the greetings, aghast at the bruised, unabashed world-weariness of these peoples' self-advertisements

"This is Angela. I'm a grown forty five year old widow from Durham. Look guys, I'm just looking for a good man; A man who doesn't play games. A man who doesn't CHEAT on his woman, because Guys, I'm the real deal and I know how to *treat* my man. I will *cook* for my man. But guys, *do not fuck with me*. I'm drug AND disease free, and enjoy sports, movies, and quiet nights at home."

America, America, this is you—huddled in the corner on the portable, mashing the keypad through the sorrowful soliloquies of your neighbors, looking for love in all the wrong places.

I breeze through the husky, unapologetic voices of men who've infiltrated the "women's" greetings to offer straight guys clandestine, no-strings-attached blowjobs. Wow, I think, this is beginning to stop being funny and be genuinely depressing. That is until I come to one greeting,

"Hey, this is Janet. I'm here in Raleigh for a job. Pretty lonely here, just looking for someone to hang out with. I like driving around, reading, punk music."

I send her a message and we connect to "chat". It's a little bit awkward at first, but soon a rapport forms naturally. She's twenty-seven, and works traveling around the country with a roving computer tech support team, living in rent-by-the-week hotels in exchange for salaried pay. She invites me to come out to her place and hang out.

I drive out past the RDU airport on the tangled, tentacled-mass that is the Beltline, the landscape flattening out into an orderly symmetry of wealth; shiny fake Thai restaurants, gas stations with equipped with televisions at the pumps, and the Extended Stay America looming behind the well-manicured lawns. I park and jingle my keys; the only sound in the sapling-tree silence other than the distant, oceanic whoosh of the highway. I walk up a couple of flights of stairs and knock on her door. A severe, plainly dressed woman answers the door, looking kind of like Janis Joplin.

"Aaron? Hey there, pad'nah" she rasps, smiling, smelling of week old kitty-litter and stale nicotine.

"Hey Janet" I grin.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Come on in!" She leads me into her dimly lit, otherwise nondescript hotel room: low-pile carpet, a TV, bed, bath, and a bible. Just four walls to exist in for a little while. She lights up a cigarette.

"Well, wait a minute. Let's go around the corner and see my friend Bill." We step out onto the carpeted open-air landing and walk around the corner to a different room, where Janet knocks, and barges in without waiting for a response.

"Bill!" she waves her arms in the air, dangling her cigarette "Look at what I found", she singsongs, cackling and pointing at me demurely. I stand there awkwardly, dangling my hands out of my pockets. Hey Bill, I'm, uh, seventeen-going-on-twenty-one, and I met Janet on a telephone dateline. Bill is in the corner tapping away at a keyboard in a tangle of cords and computer monitors and barely glances back, rolling his eyes

"Oh Jesus, Janet, can't ya see I'm busy? Hi, nice to meet you—Goodbye!" Janet laughs and drags me back to her lair. I sit on the bed while she nests on the chair, lighting another cigarette.



"Well, well, well---What are we going to do now? You want a beer?" she grins.

"I don't know" I mumble, looking down at my shoes.

"So you like punk rock, huh? How about this?" She laughs, digging through her CDs and throwing on the Misfits Collection I. She cackles louder and points her finger at the pristine stucco ceiling, screaming along:

DEMON I AM AND FACE I PEEL!  
TO SEE YOUR SKIN TURNED INSIDE OUT, CAUSE  
GOTTA HAVE YOU ON MY WALL!  
GOTTA HAVE YOU ON MY WALL, 'CAUSE  
I WANT YOUR SKULL  
I NEED YOUR SKULL

Which could be construed as a real creepy thing for someone you didn't know to sing alone to you in a nowhere hotel room, but I didn't seem to mind at the time.

"So you want to kiss or what?" she rasps, nicotine-addled, eyes at lustful half-mast.

"Sure." I say. We move towards each other, my awkward, fumbling lips finding hers and sharing a long, blissful moment. We continue pecking, intermittently. Then she begins to steadily devour my mouth hungrily, her teeth gnashing against my lips, and then, all at once, biting down

"OUCH!" I yell, drawing back, putting my hand up to feel the hot rush of blood to my mouth.

"Oh sorry, I'm not really the gentle type." She flashes her gleaming teeth predatorily. She leans forward to suck the blood off my lips. Bataille would have been proud. We kiss some more, and I'm trying to fend off her Sadist onslaught, but it's an uphill battle.

"OW FUCK!" I scream.

"Oh, you like that, huh?" she smiles at me toothily.

"You know, I have to go to work tomorrow. I should really get going." I lie, muttering sheepishly

"HA! Well, sweetie—no use in hanging around if you're in a rush. Momma likes to take it slow. You should come back when you have some time." she cajoles me, stroking my arm.

"Alright, well—see you later, Janet." I glance back at her as I walk out into the glaring daylight, lying there, smoking on the bed of some dim hotel room, staring at a muted TV, the Misfits Collection CD still skipping on the nightstand. I start the car, rejoining an empty stretch of fresh Beltway. We're just a few lonely people, I think to myself, mashing down the accelerator. Satellites fallen out of orbit, drifting through an unfathomable black, this endless voluminous nether, all the while hoping, praying for a crash.

## SIXTEEN

Jessica Hall and I are shimmying up the scalding black tarred fire escape to Camden and Will's apartment framed by an orange, sinking, behemoth sun. We could take the stairs, but no, that would be too easy. Like the Mennonites, we do things how we've always done them, idiosyncratically—with style and tradition taking the forefront to function. We would peer through his window and watch him—Camden, bastard son of some nameless famous fashion designer, always preoccupied with his sewing machines and Huggy Bear records until he turned around startled to find us behind the darkened panes, his face eventually widening into that strange amphibious grin. But Camden isn't home this particular evening, so we just lift open the unlocked window and crawl through into the immaculately tidy bedroom, almost immediately bumping into Edward who is milling about suspiciously, causing us to scream in terror and him to jump ten feet in the air. A pale, rigor-mortis looking William Evans is lying face up on his bed in the makeshift nest corner of the living room.

"Oh, hey you guys." Edward waves casually, bug-eyed and sweaty, and resumes his pacing.

"Edward, what are you doing here? And what's wrong with Will?" I ask, motioning towards the lifeless crumpled body in the corner that resembles our friend.

"Oh him? He took a couple of tablespoons of nutmeg. He'll just be out for a couple of days. But I'm taking good care of him...Mmmm, there we go, hy-dra-tion..." he coos to Will, forcing a glass of water to his dry, cracked lips.

"Guess he's not going to make it to DC for the anti-war protests." Jessica furrows her brow, obviously perturbed.

"Mmmm...he'll be fine." But coming from him this doesn't really mean much. Will and Edward, these young masters of reality, members of online focus groups whose sole purpose is the testing and redistribution of experimental hallucinogens so new they're not yet illegal, chemicals that are still referred to in hushed tones by ominous number/letter combinations. This is a young man who spends most of his days walking across Raleigh's endless tarmac shoeless. Back and forth from the impassioned tryst with his thirty-eight year old girlfriend to Will and Camden's apartment to the boozy bottom-floor squalor of Matt Joyner's pad, forming a nice little glass in your heel circuit. This is the guy I once found naked and alone in the bathtub dousing himself in beer and peanut butter. A man who wakes up at dawn to gather poppies and make tea in a gourd that he carries around strung on twine over his shoulder, only to spend the rest of the morning vomiting it up. The charming, prematurely balding, velvet-boot wearing Edward Bidanset, who quickly gives up on nursing our nutmeg-addled friend, and lures us into the halogen-white kitchen so we can accompany him while he crushes up some Aderol.

"Yep, Will should be..." he mouths, tongue tensed out, wildly concentrating on pounding the pills into more manageable chunks with a can opener.

"...just fine in about twenty-four hours or so. Just a little deep sleep, that's all, maybe he pissed himself a little." He laughs at his candidness. He's impatient and shifty-eyed, and bends his head down over the counter, holding one nostril and in one swift motion inhaling a large, nasal-cavity-blocking chunk of pill.

Edward screams in terror, lifting his arms stiffly out into the air, shouting incoherently and thrashing about the kitchen, strewn plates and glasses everywhere, and then turning over the table in a fit of Hulk-like rage. Jessica and I step out of the way and watch the wanton sacking of the apartment, until Edward recedes, hunched over in the corner, reverting back to his mild-mannered Bruce Banner form. Apparently gaining nothing from this experience, the pill still dissolving in his nose, he turns his head with pigeon-like stiffness back to his pile of seed. Homeless Justin whistles as he slams the door and walks in grinning, lice-infested Discharge shirt hanging in tatters down around his knees.

"Hey everybody" he drawls, flashing the toothy-grin of an eight year old born in the rural south, eyes at sedated half-mast. The house is now the property of the houseguests, the only rent-paying denizen KO'd on a high dose of nutmeg. Justin eases himself down into an upholstered armchair with a grandfatherly stiffness.

"You guys gotta hear this. My favorite tape of all time." He rustles through his filthy army surplus rucksack and pulls out a cassette of a live bootleg of a Conflict show. Throwing it on, it's a maelstrom shower of mincing guitars and puttering garbled Cockney vocals. We sit and listen in attentive silence.

"Wait for it...just wait for it" Justin scratches at his seat, kicking his legs up in excitement. The music grinds to a halt until just the tinny roar of the crowd can be heard. The singer shouts over the din,

*Hey! Hey! Stop! Stop that! Stop 'ittin him! You hear me?  
Stop fuckin' fighting!*

Justin shakes his head in ecstatic disbelief, looking off at nothing with the rapture of an old jazzhead,

"Did you hear that? Stop fucking fighting? Man oh man, would you listen to that..."

The Aderol starts to kick in with Edward and he's wringing his palms together, anxious for action.

"Gotta go! Gotta go! Let's go, now! C'mon!" he screams, practically pushing us out of the door, into the steamy womb of the Carolina night. Silence beckons from the empty streets of Capitol city-Boylan, Morgan, Blount, the apocalyptic tranquility only occasionally shattered by a car speeding past, driver drunk at the wheel blazing home from the downtown bar district.



Edward is walking over the tops of cars and setting off alarms on our steady descent down a condominium side street on our way to the tracks. We move down past the airplane hanger and the huge "No more prisons" mural painted on a wall across from central penitentiary, Edward is muttering incoherently the entire way, Homeless Justin following in his cow-like Xanax stupor. Jessica tries to rein in our two recalcitrant companions who venture off giggling like schoolchildren to feel up against a tree or touch an interesting piece of rusty metal. We guide them down under my favorite graffiti-covered overpass, and sit hunched down in-between the rails.

"Yeah, Now this—this is *living*", Justin sighs, pulling off his shoes to expose his gnarled, putrid feet. "I could stay here all night. Just sittin' here on the rail with you guys, you know, just shootin' the shit." Jessica shoots me the glare of a disgruntled substitute teacher who's been asked to stay and work afterschool detention.

"No, no, no....I got an idea!", Edward stands up on his tiptoes teetering on the rail, hands flailing about like an ecstatic maestro about to drift away in the night breeze, clinging onto reality by one taut single thread. He points off in the distance down the endless foggy tracks

"We'll go up to the arboretum..." he stands on his tiptoes "and...EAT FLOWERS! Whah-whah-whah-whah-whah!" bursting maniacally with a muppet-like giggle, laughing at the ridiculousness of his own suggestion.

## SEVENTEEN

Jettisoning our inebriated compatriots and going our separate ways, I end up at the pinnacle of town, where I can sponge up the greatest amount of potential weekend energy coursing through the ether—by the window on the ninth floor of the University library, watching the college students dart through the square, on their way to parties, to parents houses, to order pizza. My head buried in a Nelson Algren book, surrounded by a limitless expanse of unread, interesting attempts by other tortured predecessors, the whole eleven PM evening ahead of me. The sweet sidewalk honeysuckle scent of spring, and the sweaty summer plateau after that, from a distance the future seemingly imbued with possibility. I turn around in my seat just in time to see Chris Carraway staring down the aisle, sauntering towards me through the stacks, Cheshire grin intact.

"Hee-y buddy", he yelps, "Wanna go to a party?" ribbing me with that bottomless enthusiasm. Of course I want to go to a party. How could I say no to yet another gathering? One more chance to be thrown into the mix and have my social skills put to a trial by fire. I postpone sponging up my thin tome until later.

"Let's get out of here", we dart down the elevator, out into the brickyard and into the cool, dark night.

## EIGHTEEN

In true Southern style, the party is already in full effect--bearded, Pabst-swilling rockers spilling out down the front porch railing, an end of the workweek sparkle in their eyes as each alone attempt to summon their full reserves of wit and conversational dexterity with which to chat each other up. The exaggerated laughter of alpha-males/queen-bees loudly dominating little makeshift circles in the floodlit shadow of the house. Intimate, second-base destined conversations are happening on the decrepit children's swing set across the dirtpit expanse of the weedy backyard. There are acquaintances swarming everywhere, conversations with Weezer Blue Album-sample-like inanity waiting to be had. I try to avoid eye contact with the people I went to high school with, many of whom have since shed their adolescent, acne-ridden skin and emerged from their cocoons, metamorphosed into well-adjusted Myspace-savvy scenesters, suave and overconfident social carp trolling through their small pond. All the usual suspects are here. The bearded, jovial Rich Ivey is in full effect, like a taxonomist correctly identifying friends by first and last name as they walk by and extending his firm hand to shake. Kristin Porter smokes long cigarettes and jumbles a drink excitedly in her hand, her slinky dress and timeless social grace characteristic of a flapper from a bygone era. I squeeze my way through the thronging masses into the sweaty living room, which swells and pounds to the beat. People are glistening and TV-eyed, undulating on each other in snake-like syncopations to the blaring soul music. I stand in the corner surveying the vibrating mass like an anthropologist in the field.

"Look at yourself", Aaron, my curmudgeonly-inner-grandfather shakes his head in disappointment, "Acting like you're in some kind of primate research laboratory, observing the mating season". So, in an attempt to thrust off the yoke of lassitude that I've tethered myself to, I jump into the mix and do my best James-Brown-performing-Hot-Pants which in real terms, translates as Aaron-Smith-wildly-vacillating-in-place, arms and legs flying into Kristin Porter's head. A short redheaded girl in a wifebeater that I've never seen before boogies up to me and grabs my cheeks, squeezing.

"What's *your* name?" she smiles, writhing in place.

"Ahhh-winn" I mouth from behind her pinching hand.

"Well *Ahh-winn*" she shrieks, "Are you going to dance with me?" Well, I guess I am. Why not, right? I shimmy up closer to her and step on her feet, mouthing apologies for my pitiful attempt at synchronized rhythm. She wiggles back and forth, a comfortable bubble of space between us, seeming unperturbed by my irregular cadence. I begin to feel disturbed by the whole mammalia-ness of this routine, like we're putting on a show for each other, checking out each others performance to see if we're suitable mates in the sparing milliseconds when the other person is glancing away, at the same time scanning the vibrating mass for other, more compatible companions.

"C'mon, we're going outside" she grabs my arm dragging me through the crowd and out the front door. We walk out to the front porch and she lights up a cigarette.

"Let's go DO something--something fun." She cackles, bouncing up and down, dispensing with common introductory protocol. I don't know why she has picked me, but she has just stated, as a demand, what I consider to be a central premise of my worldview, and shown me that raw stuff of youth that I am much more into than the awkward milling about or meek attempts at dirty dancing.

"I know this place we can walk to." I say. We step off the porch into the haze of light rain.

"I haven't seen you around here before. I'm Serena, by the way." She grins, jostling forward.

"I just moved back." I say, trying to keep her pace.

"Do you know Marian?"

"No."

"How about Sean P.?"

"No."

"Abe?"

## NINETEEN

It dawns on me that there is no extended network, no string of friends or social scene to bind us together; we exist in completely different worlds. We circle the tree-lined residential blocks, marveling at how the neighborhood, so dull and unremarkable by the light of day, has been transformed into a glistening twilight playground.

Each crack in the pavement a notable detail worth examining, sidewalks lined with copses of honeysuckle, ripe black berries dropping from trees. We creep past the Han-Dee-Hugo's convenience store, silent and shut down for the evening, back behind the small hive of storage units to the wooden ledge overlooking the train yard. Red lights dot the tops of cell phone towers across the neon wilderness in the fog, blinking on and off, looking like a giant's eyes. Mist is rising up from the tracks and swirling in front of a rumbling engine's three, enormous, night-penetrating headlights. The train unleashes a booming hiss and creaks forward towards the crossing, boxcars thumping back and forth, just feet away down the rocky precipice from our hiding spot. There's nothing like finding a secret side of a place you've lived for years, a black wardrobe to crawl through into another world. Serena and I huddle close and watch the gray sunrise, getting soaked from the drizzle.



The Han-dee-Hugo's has turned on its fluorescent lights and whirring air-conditioner, it's pristine sliding glass doors are whooshing open to the world, bowing with electronic grace to the inevitability of another day. We stop in and get coffee to go, carrying it back to Serena's house. I get the feeling that I could stay over, but I find myself nauseated by the thought of waking up there later, the hard afternoon light of reality beaming in on us, the talk of work, exchanging numbers, erecting structures with which to cling on to one another. Let's keep it fleeting and ephemeral, a glimpse of what might have been. Pull the evening off like a glass slipper and let the magic fade, never to see each other again. The screen door creeks closed and I stumble off the porch and down the stone steps, back out to the familiarity of the wet sidewalk, a steaming hot cup of coffee in my hand, walking back home down Hillsborough street in the rain.

The buzz of mosquitos. The mosquito-like electric whine of the streetlight blinking on and off across the street, possibly short-circuited by the substantial collection of shoes strung up over the powerlines. A stagnant mist of ozone lingering low in the sky from the fresh rain, thick pine trees swaying like ancient royalty over their sovereign dominion. Jacked-up Thunderbirds and pick-ups occasionally blasting across the block to Park Avenue, beating it to IHOP for the time-sensitive Breakfast Special. Matt Joyner sits statuesque in the dark on the green upholstered couch grasping an unwavering cigarette, long cylinder of ash held together by the morning damp steadily encroaching on his yellowed fingers. He turns to me and grins as I steadily mount the steps.

"Hey" he laughs, sipping on a beer "Where have *you* been?"

"Just passing time." I mumble, opening the door and stepping in.

**AARON  
SMITH**

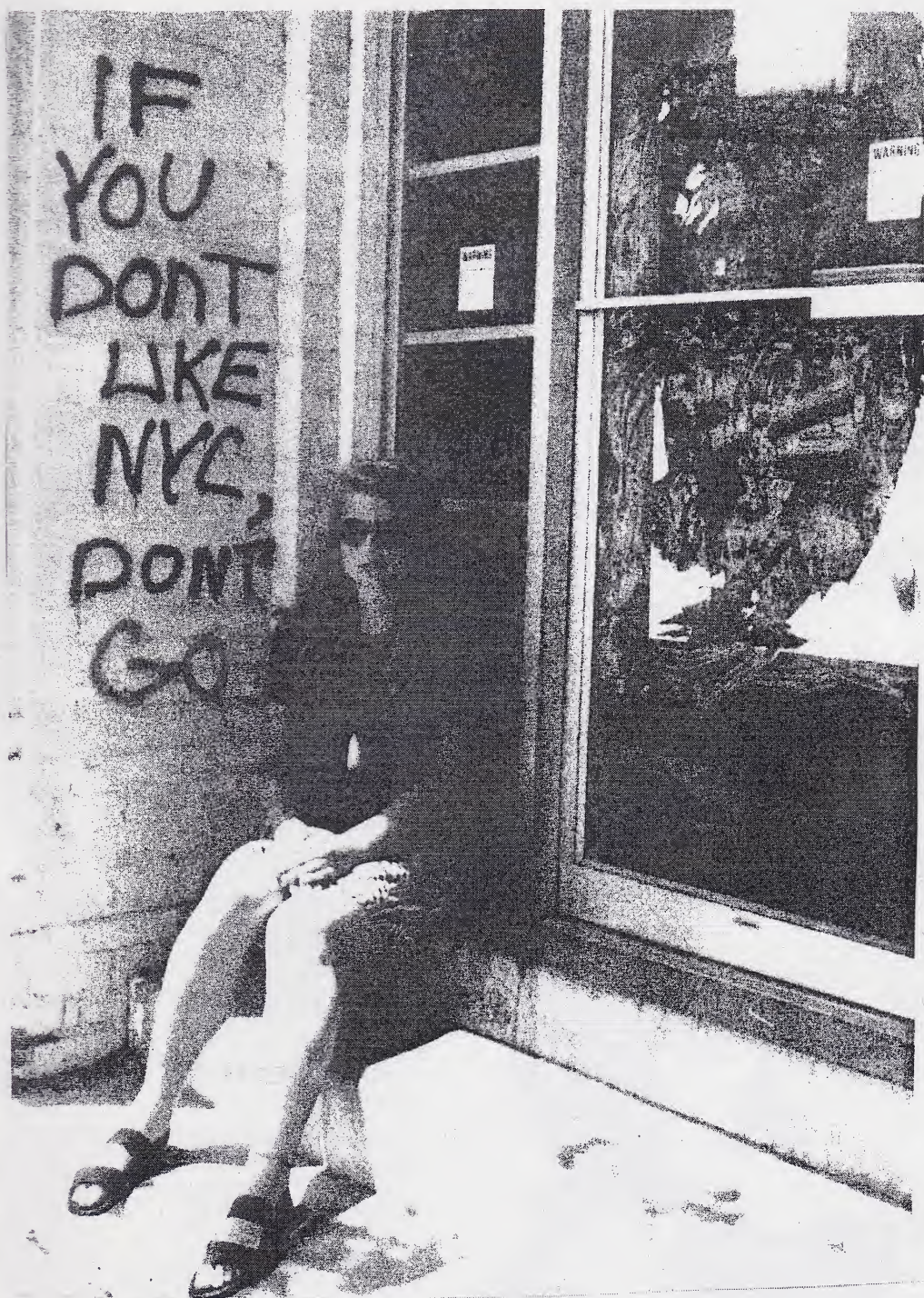
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**I don't know you.**

**I don't know your  
company.**

**I don't know your  
product.**

**I don't know your  
customers.**

**I don't know your  
record.**

**I don't know your  
reputation.**

**Now ... just what was it  
you wanted to sell me?**